

Approaching Censorship: James Baker Hall's “The Approaching Sky” and Central Kentucky’s Memorial Event for 9/11 by Chris Green

At the climax of his tenure as Poet Laureate of Kentucky, James Baker Hall was invited to read a poem at the 2002 United We Stand memorial event in Lexington, Kentucky. Conducted at The Red Mile, a harness race track in Lexington, the event drew a crowd of more than 2,500 representing a cross-section of race, class, age, occupation, and religious belief. The event offered a moving variety of performances, speeches, prayers, music, and processions. But Hall never appeared on stage.

Sponsored by a coalition of civic and corporate groups, this public gathering was designed to commemorate those lost in the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania that took place on September 11, 2001. The memorial event’s chairperson explained that the goal was to create “a fully inclusive opportunity for people of all races, religions, and ethnic backgrounds to come together.”¹

When Hall offered to read a poem by Keats or Yeats, an organizer insisted he read one of his own poems. At the request of the event organizers, Hall submitted the poem he planned to read, “The Approaching Sky,” assuming that its performance time needed to be verified. Instead, Hall was notified by letter that his poem was being reviewed by the organizers. He responded with a letter of his own: “I appear to be in a situation in which my poem is subject to approval or disapproval by somebody or somebodies. That situation is intolerable. I had no idea I was submitting myself to a situation of this kind.”

Hall withdrew his poem while the event’s primary organizers were deciding to reject him as a participant. Several explanations for excluding Hall were offered at the time during interviews I conducted. One organizer claimed that the poem’s representation of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians lacked solemnity.² Another organizer claimed that Hall’s poem was weighed equally against all other community submissions, and concluded that its quality was offset by the danger that the poem would offend people of various religious perspectives.³ A third organizer found the word “bullshit” offensive and inappropriate for a family atmosphere. The rejection of Hall’s poem was also justified by the claim that the committee had received so many talented submissions that, in addition to rejecting Hall, they had to reject a Veterans of Foreign Wars group and a barbershop quartet.⁴

"The Approaching Sky," reprinted with permission from the University Press of Kentucky, recognizes America's role in the cycle of violence that led to the 9/11 attacks. Its call for love and prayer-clarified vision as a way of preventing further violence is a call to moral action. At its writing, then-president George W. Bush was planning to combat terrorism by invading Iraq, a response that would cost thousands of lives. Should the families who gathered at the United We Stand event have heard this four-minute poem, nested among other speakers and songs? Would "The Approaching Sky" have created discord?

"If we can't see that 9/11 belongs to us all, and that there are various responses to it, then we don't understand totalitarianism at all," Hall told me in an interview. "If that poem is denied a place in a public event a year later in the name of security and unity, then that's scary."

Endnotes

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1. Marty Kish (Chair of United We Stand Committee, Vice-President of Public Affairs for Valvoline, United Way of the Bluegrass's 2002 Campaign Chair), email to author, October 30, 2002.
 2. Anonymous, telephone interview with author, November 4, 2002.
 3. Marty Kish (Chair of United We Stand Committee, Vice-President of Public Affairs for Valvoline, United Way of the Bluegrass's 2002 Campaign Chair) taped interview with author, United Way of the Bluegrass Headquarters, November 2002.
 4. Ron Mossotti (President of Hammond Communications group) and staff, taped interview with author, Hammond Communications Headquarters, Lexington, KY, November 2002.